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ABSTRACT

Noting that a list of individual student to whole class configurations and a set of activities are inadequate, this booklet argues that the question of how to organize classrooms for learning in the language arts is complex. The booklet argues that decisions about time, space, materials and resources, and student grouping must flow from an understanding of: (1) holistic/social-constructivist views of learning; (2) the conditions under which language and literacy learning take place; (3) literacy definitions of the 21st century; and (4) the instructional implications of cultural pluralism in classrooms in light of democratic ideals and equity issues in a diverse society. The booklet summarizes highlights from the literature on each of the four areas; discusses and provides examples of time- and space-use, and selection of materials and resources; discusses grouping practices grounded in current perspectives; and provides examples of grouping and of instruction that enhance group work processes. An annotated list of 9 resources for further study and 17 references are attached. (RS)

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LITERACY IMPROVEMENT SERIES
FOR ELEMENTARY EDUCATORS

Making Decisions About Grouping in Language Arts

Gleopellen Pace

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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—Shouldn't I be doing most of my teaching to the whole class as a group?

—Isn't it best to send my poor readers to the reading specialist for skills work during reading time?

—Shouldn't I give my TAG students independent work to complete at their level?

—I like the idea of cooperative learning groups, but how do I know which kids are actually doing the work?

—How can I justify group projects when I don't have enough time to teach basic reading and language skills?

Introduction

Several major and interrelated developments over the past twenty years have resulted in teachers' reexamining the ways they organize for instruction. Our knowledge and understanding about learning in general—and about language and how we learn language in particular—have undergone profound change, from a transmission model of learning (bits of information and discrete skills are transmitted from teacher to pupil) to a transactional model (learners engaged with their environments are active participants in constructing their own knowledge). Furthermore, as American society becomes more diverse and technology "shrinks" the world, demands for effective communication across cultures and within a global community have changed literacy and learning goals. We now recognize that literacy serves multiple purposes in varied contexts; we talk about "multiple literacies." This concept reminds us that literacy is not just for record keeping, but for learning, for problem solving, for creative and critical thinking, and for the all-important ability to connect with others within and across cultures. Our increasingly diverse society forces us to reexamine schools and schooling—and, central to the elementary curriculum, language and literacy instruction—in light of our founding democratic values, the promise of equity in education, and our understanding of the roles of teachers and students in knowledge construction. (See Hiebert, 1991, for an excellent set of papers on these interrelationships.)

Thus, the question of how to organize classrooms for learning in the language arts is complex. A list of individual student to whole class configurations and a set of activities, while comforting, are inadequate. Decisions about time, space, materials and resources, and student grouping must flow from an understanding of 1) holistic/social-constructivist views of learning, 2) the conditions under which language and literacy learning take place, 3) literacy definitions for the 21st century, and 4) the instructional implications of cultural pluralism in classrooms in light of democratic ideals and equity issues in a diverse society.

In this paper I will:

1. Summarize highlights from the literature on each of these four areas as a foundation for enlightened decision making
2. Discuss and provide examples of time- and space-use, and selection of materials and resources
3. Discuss grouping practices grounded in current perspectives, and provide examples of grouping and of instruction that enhances group work processes
4. List resources for further study

Foundations for Instructional Decision Making in Language Arts

Holistic/Social-Constructivist Views of Learning

Holistic approaches embed skill and strategy learning within meaningful, goal-oriented contexts. Learning occurs from whole to part to whole in contrast to mechanistic approaches that teach skills first in isolation, before they are applied (often *instead of* being applied) to specific contexts. Jean Piaget's constructivist views support holistic teaching practices that encourage student invention, initiation, autonomy, inquiry, theory-building, and prediction. Students learn complex processes through active engagement in holistic, meaning-centered endeavors. However, learning has social as well as personal dimensions. Lev Vygotsky's theories emphasize the critical role of social interaction in learning and tell us meanings—both personal and social—are socially constructed. An interactive, collaborative environment allows learners to work in Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," that cognitive area in which a learner cannot yet act alone, but can function successfully

with support from an adult or a more knowledgeable peer (what Bruner, 1986, p. 132, calls a "loan of consciousness"). This mediation *promotes cognitive development* since thought and language processes that begin interpersonally later become intrapersonal. *Language is central* to this mediation process, a contrast with Piaget's view of language as reflecting but not determining thought.

Holistic approaches embed skill and strategy learning within meaningful, goal-oriented contexts.

Piaget and Vygotsky each provide useful lenses for examining teaching and learning. We do not have to select one set of theories and reject the other. But they did examine learning in different ways; and Piaget, unlike Vygotsky, actually focused very little on language. Piaget's stage development theory suggests the child's learning is largely controlled biologically—by the learner's developmental stage. The task of an outside agent is to encourage active engagement in developmentally appropriate learning tasks so that learners can make connections for themselves. Duckworth's (1987) essays on teaching and learning include rich examples of classroom and curriculum organization from a Piagetian perspective.

Importance of the teacher and social interaction. Vygotsky's social-constructivist theories augment the importance of the teacher and of social interaction. Two points seem useful:

1. From a Vygotskian perspective, construction of knowledge depends upon a rich array of social encounters and interactions leading learners to *be* successful with tasks they could not yet accomplish alone. For example, a sixth-grade teacher makes small group conferences a key feature of her daily writing workshop. At first she is a member of all conferencing groups, providing demonstrations of questions and comments that help authors focus on what they are saying and how they are saying it. In the role of audience, students function more successfully than they would without her participation, and authors revise their papers more successfully than they could without the conference. Gradually, students begin to engage in successful conferencing without the teacher. By the end of the year, several students have learned to

take their audience into account in reading and revising drafts on their own. Just writing, without audience feedback, does not generally help writers develop this sense of audience.

2. Previous social-instructional encounters explain an individual's "developmental level" with respect to a particular task, in contrast with a view of the learner as "trapped" within a biologically determined, single stage of development. The developmental level reflected in a given student's behavior, rather than being fixed, will vary across tasks based on that student's interests and experiences. For example, I have seen children in first-grade classrooms with daily writing workshops featuring a strong conferencing component exceed inexperienced sixth-grade writers in their ability to consider audience as they write.

Features of classroom instruction. Classroom instruction based on social-constructivist theory has several features. For example:

1. Students and teacher form an interactive, collaborative, meaning-centered learning community in which *all* the players (the teacher included) are *trusted* to contribute their varied experiences and knowledge to construct multiple shared and personal meanings. This is not a laissez-faire approach. As the teacher, you are a *central player*, not someone who "sits out," afraid of "getting in the way of" students' knowledge construction. But neither is this approach *teacher-centered*, where your meanings are *the* meanings students must "get." Instead, you play multiple roles: demonstrator, mediator, keen observer and listener. As demonstrator, you provide ongoing, rich demonstrations of purposeful language, literacy, and thought in use. As mediator, you have a major impact on students' learning, providing what I call *empowering support*—support that leaves the child in charge, but able to succeed.

The teacher plays multiple roles: demonstrator, mediator, keen observer and listener.

To be a successful mediator, become a keen observer and listener who can learn from students; ask questions that invite and guide further exploration; orchestrate an environment filled with a wide range of pertinent materials, social encounters, and problem-driven tasks and events that allow children to engage and disen-

gage at their individual level; and *trust* that children—when they are purposefully engaged—do learn.

2. Organizational structures should promote a variety of interactions between students and you (and other adults) and among students with varying knowledge and expertise so learners can function within their individual zones of proximal development.

3. Diversity in the classroom—all types of diversity—is a *strength.* If adult(s) and students respect and listen to one another, diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and alternative interpretations hold tremendous potential for the rich and varied, shared and personal learning that is so important in a diverse society.

Conditions Under Which Language and Literacy Learning Take Place

Brian Cambourne's research identifies seven conditions—present when children are learning to talk and consistent with holistic and social-constructivist theories—that contribute to successful literacy learning:

1. *Immersion* of learners in text of all kinds
2. Multiple, ongoing *demonstrations* of construction and use of texts
3. The *expectation* that learners will succeed
4. Allowing learners to make their own decisions, to take *responsibility*
5. Time and opportunity to *use* literacy in realistic, authentic ways
6. Allowance for *approximation*; understanding the essential nature of "mistakes" in promoting learning
7. *Response* ("relevant, appropriate, timely, readily available, nonthreatening, with no strings attached") from more knowledgeable peers and adults (Cambourne, 1988, p. 33)

Cambourne's conditions provide a highly useful framework for examining your classroom's physical environment, projects and activities, and interaction patterns to see how likely they are to promote language and literacy development.

Literacy Definitions for the 21st Century

McCollum (1991, p. 119) states that literacy today should be viewed as learning to unlock the printed code "and accommodate multiple levels of meaning through a complex system of social rela-

tions." Definitions of literacy change to meet the needs and expectations of different people and different cultures at different times. For example, historically we find definitions such as ability to write one's name and read a few Bible verses, completing four years of school, or acquiring knowledge of Greek and Latin (Cambourne, 1988, p. 2). The literacy we define today is far more demanding than any of these, requiring the ability to use literacy for creative and critical thinking, for problem solving, for communicating with language across cultures and among nations, for "construct(ing) meanings from different perspectives and understand(ing) how one's meanings may differ from those of others" (Hiebert, 1991, p.3). In understanding the implications of this more demanding definition of literacy, we need to define two concepts: the view of reading as a *transaction*, and the notion of *multiple literacies*.

Reading as transaction. Scholars today generally view reading as a *transaction* (originally described by Rosenblatt, 1938) in which a reader and text within a particular context are *both changed* as meaning is constructed. What the reader brings to the text is as important to the meaning-making process as what the text contains. This is not to be misconstrued as "anything goes." *Both the text and the reader* make important contributions, and constructed meanings can be judged for their goodness of fit to each. (See Bruner, 1986, pp.151–160, for an excellent discussion of this.)

Multiple literacies. The notion of *multiple literacies* refers to both purposes and ways of knowing. Literacy may be understood as an ability to negotiate meanings with others and with one's world, "to apply knowledge for specific purposes in particular contexts of use" (McCollum, 1991, p. 108). We need different literacies for different purposes; we *are literate* in situations where we can access appropriate knowledge for a given purpose and context. The concept of linguistic *registers* in oral language is helpful in understanding the notion of multiple literacies. As competent communicators we recognize differences in the way we speak, for example, to our 2-year old about to run into the street, to a close friend on the telephone, to an irate parent at a school board meeting, to our school superintendent at a cocktail party. Differing purposes and contexts affect the form of our language, the *register*. (We may use different vocabulary, different grammatical structures, different pronunciation patterns.) Our ability to function effectively in a pluralistic and global society depends upon our acquiring a wide range of *registers*, and a wide range of literacies, so that we

may communicate and connect with others for a variety of purposes across cultures and nationalities.

Additional instructional implications emerge when we link our understanding of *multiple purposes* with the notion of *multiple ways of knowing*. Jerome Harste and his colleagues have shown that alternative communication systems (e.g., music, art, dance, drama, math) are all interconnected with language, all part of a "system of knowing" (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984, pp. 206–220). Thus, when we provide opportunities for children to construct meanings across symbol systems we help them to appreciate and to use multiple ways of knowing and to develop multiple literacies.

Democratic Ideals and Equity Issues in a Pluralistic Society

Equality of opportunity is a founding value of our democratic society. Yet, a number of studies in the last decade have shown that ethnic differences in communication styles and expectations between a teacher and student can have an adverse effect on the student's opportunities for learning (e.g., Barnhardt, 1982; Heath, 1983; Michaels & Cazden, 1986; Philips, 1983.). Three concepts related to equity issues and instructional organization seem especially important:

Implications of reading as transaction. The implications of a *transactional view of reading* for classroom instructional organization in a pluralistic society are profound. Edelsky (1991, p. 163) points out that when we view reading as a transaction between a reader—with all of his/her experiences and meanings—and a text in a particular context, we are forced to acknowledge "readers' home discourses, schemas, and personal histories (including histories with other texts) as prime contributions on the reader's part."

Diversity as strength. Our recognition that differing discourse styles across languages and dialects represent *language strengths* challenges instructional practices based on a deficit view of nonmainstream children's language. Examples of such practices include attempts to supplant nonmainstream children's language with school language rather than to expand children's language registers, targeting children as "low performers" simply because they do not speak standard English, and insisting children have a "read-

ing problem" because in oral reading they make substitutions from a nonmainstream dialect.

Impact of differing discourse styles on learning. We now have substantial evidence of adverse effects on children's learning when *discourse styles* differ between teacher and student in traditional, teacher-centered settings. These findings underscore the importance of open discourse structures promoting conversations among all participants in a meaning-centered environment.

Researchers have identified a variety of differences in language use and discourse styles between home and classroom settings, such as narrative styles, turn-taking rules, and expectations regarding questioning of children by adults. For example, Michaels and Cazden (1986) report on studies of Sharing Time in five different mixed-racial, primary-grade classrooms in Berkeley and Boston. Whereas white children's narratives were "topic-centered," generally focused on one topic with a clear beginning, middle, and end (a style congruent with their white teachers' expectations), African-American children's narratives were "topic-associating," characterized by implicit associations with no clear beginning, middle, and end. Though "topic-associating" narratives ultimately lead to a main point, this was often missed by the teachers. The teachers' lack of knowledge regarding a "topic-associating" style led to mistimed interventions, and to exchanges that were often confrontational rather than collaborative. African-American children ended up speaking for shorter periods of time and did not experience the benefits of negotiating meaning with a more experienced language user.

We can't understand all cultures, but we can look for differences as strengths.

Differences in linguistic style also occur with question-asking expectations (Heath, 1983). Working-class African-American adults in the community Heath studied rarely asked children questions with predetermined answers, instead asking "real" questions that sought information from the child. In contrast, in middle class communication patterns—African-American and white—adults tend to ask children questions for which the adult already knows the answer in order for the child to demonstrate knowledge. This latter

style is, again, characteristic of traditional, teacher-centered classroom discourse. The work of Heath (1983) and others gives us a clear message: Understanding the cultures within a classroom, and advocating for students' native language and culture, leads to remarkable increases in learning, along with opportunities to acknowledge learning that otherwise is often unrecognized.

But how, you may ask, can teachers possibly gain an adequate understanding of the ever greater number of cultures represented in American classrooms? We can't. But we *can* understand and look for differences as strengths. We can orchestrate a classroom environment that fosters conversations allowing for diverse perspectives and alternative interpretations; that makes use of a range of discourse structures with opportunities to try varied structures in a safe, supportive environment. And we can remember that any particular discourse event will not be an equally beneficial learning experience for all students, so we need to openly acknowledge and allow for differences in responses and in the specifics of what is learned. For example, after we read a book aloud to a class, rather than peppering children with questions about the story for which we have specific responses in mind, we should lead a follow-up discussion that allows children to share their individual responses to the story. Rich literature promotes a rich array of connections. We support development of thought and language when we provide opportunities for children to formulate and express their own connections, and to hear those of others.

Instructional Implications for the Language Arts of a Social-Constructivist, Democratic View

Use of Time, Space, and Materials

Organization of time, space, and materials is clearly interrelated with decisions about student grouping. Nonetheless, I'd like to focus briefly on these considerations before turning to grouping issues.

Time. Unlike traditional skills approaches that segment time for language arts in order to separate instruction in spelling, handwriting, reading, and so forth, holistic (whole-part-whole), social-constructivist approaches call for longer blocks of instructional time

so that students can pursue a variety of activities and projects across a range of social configurations from whole class to small group to individual. Time is an important factor in fostering thoughtful conversations, collaborations, and other opportunities for mediation to support learning. I find a successful learning community atmosphere is more apt to develop with a relatively brief whole class meeting, followed by time to work in various less-than-whole class configurations, followed by a brief whole class meeting. Single-group meetings to begin the day or a lengthy class period provide opportunities for shared learning experiences and for group and individual goal setting. At the end of a work period, and again at the end of the day, these meetings are times to talk about accomplishments and reassess goals, both of which add to children's sense of purposefulness and the day-to-day continuity of classroom life. These meetings are important opportunities for the teacher to support growing communicative competence among students, to recognize individual learning and enhance shared learning, and to provide a variety of language demonstrations.

Space. Whether or not we're in a classroom with plenty of space and ideal furniture, what we do with what we have is important. Major considerations include:

- An appropriate space for the class to gather as a whole
- A desk or table arrangement that makes it easy for children to move around and to interact with one another in dyads, triads, and small groups
- Space for pairs or small groups to conference or otherwise work together away from students working quietly on their own, and away from teacher-led small group instruction
- Easy access to books and other materials and resources

Grouping desks or tables together rather than in traditional rows creates larger floor spaces and improves the flow of traffic. For whole class meetings, a space that pulls children closer together than in traditional classroom rows—or at table groups spread around the room—enhances communication and engagement. When students are spread out all over a room many are less apt to feel they are a part of what is happening, creating the potential for more, not fewer, behavior problems. While young children are quite comfortable sitting on a carpeted floor or on carpet

squares, by fifth or sixth grade many students find this less comfortable. Planning and practicing a routine to bring chairs to the meeting area will help make these gatherings more effective for middle grades students.

Materials and other resources. Variety and accessibility are primary concerns.

- Fill the room with print: books (fiction, nonfiction, picture books, reference books, kid-authored books, class-made books, little books, big books, pop-up books, all kinds of books), periodicals, newspapers, newsletters, brochures, phone books, catalogues, junk mail, signs, posters, banners.
- Use wall charts serving a variety of functions and purposes: calendars, birthday, and weather charts; poetry and song charts; summaries of important information; students' writing or special reports. Two characteristics guide the content of wall charts: The material is of interest or import to the classroom community, and students will refer to the material often.
- Immersing children in print is important at all grade levels—kindergarten, too. Surrounding children with print is to literacy as surrounding children with speech is to oral communication. A print-rich environment offers ongoing invitations to children to participate in the literate community.
- Most kindergartens I see these days have a variety of centers where children engage in constructive play, centers that reflect Piagetian constructivism. To reflect our more current knowledge of language development based on Vygotskian perspectives, these centers should invite reading and writing, too. For example, the grocery center might have labels and prices on grocery items; paper, pencils, and pens near the cash register; small tablets and writing tools for writing grocery lists; newspapers for sale. The office center needs materials for writing telephone messages, a calendar, paper for the typewriter (I recommend an old typewriter over an old computer keyboard since a typewriter will produce print), and so forth. Neuman and Roskos (1990) provide a lengthy list of ideas for including literacy props in play centers.
- At primary grades (K-3) you'll need a writing materials center stocked with a wide assortment of paper (unlined, lined, pic-

ture area plus lines, colored, various sizes, shapes, weights), pencils, regular pens, felt-tip pens, tape, staplers (crayons and glue, also, if children don't have their own supplies). These materials—along with demonstrations from you, from a variety of books brought into the classroom, and from peers—stimulate an array of literacy explorations. For example, children do not necessarily choose to write on lined paper, or to include an illustration with every four or five lines of print. And in an environment that stimulates choice and invention, drawing, writing, and various manipulations of materials (pop-up books, windows and other cut-out areas, 20-page scrolls created by taping sheets of paper together) become a part of children's meaning-making with print.

- At all grade levels you'll want a good collection of books organized for easy access. In the library corner include a variety of books from your permanent collection, a rotating collection of books from the school library and other sources, class-made big books, and books by student authors. Reserve a table for bi-weekly "special collection" books: a featured author or illustrator, a theme, a genre.

- Don't forget to look beyond your classroom walls (and school library) for resources: people and places as well as print resources. For example, recently a fifth grader professing an interest in studying makeup and hairstyles found nothing on this topic in her school library. Rather than solving her problem by selecting a new topic, she might have consulted area beauticians, beauty schools, and beauty product sales people. She might have gathered information through interviewing, brochures and other available print materials; perhaps she'd spend an afternoon with a beautician at work. Years ago, a sixth-grade student of mine with a passionate interest in Evel Kneival, discovered Evel's brother lived nearby. He found out where the brother worked, looked up the telephone number in the phone book, telephoned and set up an interview, made arrangements to get to the interview on the bus, developed questions, recorded both the information he gained and his impressions of Evel's brother compared with Evel, and completed a report to share with the rest of the class. Another year my grades 4-5-6 class extended various environmental studies

to the school playground, the surrounding neighborhood, and an area downtown.

Grouping Students for Instruction

Grouping considerations are, of course, affected by federal and state mandates, as well as district, school, and sometimes grade-level policies and agreements. I will discuss examples of a variety of grouping purposes and configurations to support language learning within the classroom, but first I want to comment separately on multi-age grouping, teaching the same group of children for more than one year, and pullout programs, all topics of widespread interest at this time.

Multi-age grouping. If you are organizing from a *holistic, social-constructivist perspective*, if your curriculum reflects a *transactional view of encounters with texts* (written and oral), and if you accept the premise that your students' varied linguistic competencies represent differing *language strengths*, then a span of two to three grade levels makes no significant difference in the way a class functions. Though traditional grade-level thinking promotes a notion of grade-level differences, in my experience the range of individual differences within a same-age group is approximately the same as within groups spanning two to three years. Of course group profiles differ by age group, and we all recognize developmental trends that correlate with chronological age. But individual differences in experiences and development, as any teacher knows, make for wide variations in what children of any given age bring to and construct from classroom encounters. Individuals bring differing strengths to different processes and topics of study. It is not always the older child who is an expert in a particular situation, though a less mathematically able older child may have better organizational skills than a younger partner in learning. And what about situations where the older child is more able? Some parents worry about multi-age grouping for these students. But for years

. . . a span of two to three grade levels makes no significant difference in the way a class functions.

we've had evidence that in cross-age tutoring situations the older child, serving as tutor, learns more than the tutee, so interactions of this nature can be beneficial to both students as well.

In an interactive learning environment greater diversity in age actually promotes attitudes and collaborations that help children of all abilities function within their individual zones of proximal development. However, a critical factor for success, in my experience, is acceptance of everyone as an equally valued member of the classroom community *unidentified by grade level*. I recommend an age span of two years in a self-contained classroom with one teacher. But with a compatible teaching team a three-year span is quite reasonable. Perhaps the richest teaching and learning I have participated in were the three years I spent teaming with another teacher and 55 fourth, fifth, and sixth graders.

Teaching a group of students for more than one year. Some teachers are discovering the benefits of moving through the grades with the same group of children for several years. If you teach a multi-age class, you may keep half of your students for a second year as you bring on a new group from the grade level below. But teaching a single grade level and remaining with your class as they move, for example, from third through fifth grade, reaps a multitude of benefits for everyone (see Swartz, 1992, for a discussion of some of these benefits). For example:

- The time it takes to build a well functioning learning community happens during the first year.
- Children return to the same community the following year knowing classroom expectations and ready to get on with their learning.
- New children entering the classroom community to replace students who have moved (during the year or over the summer) are quickly "brought on board" by experienced students.
- Effective communication with parents, nurtured over time, makes for stronger home-school connections, an important factor in children's learning.
- You, the teacher, develop a better knowledge and understanding of each child's strengths, dreams, and needs. And you gain a far better sense of children's language and literacy development—of the interplay between mediated experiences and

cognitive development—over a period of two or three years than over one year.

- The stability of one teacher and a relatively unchanged classroom community may be especially important for children who for a variety of reasons lead disruptive, insecure lives outside of school.

Pullout programs. How we can best serve children with special learning needs (whether Chapter 1 or Talented and Gifted [TAG] students) raises complex questions and issues. Though decisions about what is best for an individual student will vary, I suggest two interrelated guiding principles. First, I recommend avoiding pullout programs that remove the *same* children from the classroom *over extended periods* of time. Second, I submit that all children need to be full-fledged members of a learning community, something that is made more difficult for a child who is removed from the classroom activities and rhythms for a period of time. (This is not to say that *all* children should be mainstreamed into regular classrooms. For example, issues of equal opportunity to learn arise for deaf children who depend upon sign language in classrooms where only the interpreter can sign; under these conditions, the full range of conversations and therefore access to knowledge is unavailable. In a setting where everyone signs, the deaf child is a full-fledged member of the learning community.)

All children need to be full-fledged members of a learning community.

Given the well documented importance of self-concept in successful learning, the stigma attached to labeling children as poor students and pulling them from classrooms is difficult to support. Furthermore, many—though certainly not all—of these programs focus on isolated skills and drills, rarely tied to classroom work and at odds with holistic, constructivist, transactional models of learning. Even where programs do reflect a transactional model, maintaining connections and continuity with students' classroom programs may remain problematic (e.g., the regular classroom reflects a transmission model; or the child experiences disorientation and fragmentation due to a lack of communication between the regular teacher and the pullout program teacher). In keeping with

current models, interactive, natural learning classrooms offer far more opportunities for children to work in their zones of proximal development through collaboration with other students along with mediation by the teacher. Today, special education personnel in some schools form teams that work in classrooms. I believe this approach has promise.

But what about a program such as Reading Recovery (Clay, 1982), a pullout program of individual instruction targeting children at risk for failure in learning to read? Reading Recovery has demonstrated a high success rate. It is important to note that the program is intense and short-term; that it is firmly grounded in current language and learning theory; and that it places the teacher in the role of a highly knowledgeable mediator working with the child in his or her zone of proximal development. Once the intervention is completed, usually a period of three to four months, most children function successfully as beginning readers and writers, needing no further assistance. Furthermore, if the literacy program in the child's classroom is consonant with the holistic/constructivist theory undergirding Reading Recovery, continuity between classroom and pullout experiences is possible. I do have one concern about Reading Recovery as implemented in this country. In New Zealand, where Clay developed this program, children identified as at risk for failure to learn to read had spent a year or more in print-immersion classrooms. In the United States, some children being identified have spent a year in kindergartens with constructive play environments devoid of print. Thus, children may be identified "at risk" who would have made successful progress had they been in a literacy-rich kindergarten program. The most important message here may be the need for widespread change in preschool and kindergarten classrooms.

Interactive, natural learning classrooms offer more opportunities for children.

And what about TAG programs? I have a long history of interest in TAG education, and I firmly believe academically able children also need appropriate instruction to continue to develop as thinkers and users of language. However, at least two problems seem worthy of mention. First, identification procedures and poli-

cies tend to be somewhat inaccurate and arbitrary. Which children get included and excluded, and why, is often hard to justify. Besides that, traditional pullout TAG programs frequently have the same problems for these children as they have for students at the other end of the academic spectrum: Children are labeled (labeling can have negative effects even for bright children, skewing their attitudes toward others and self in relation to others), they are removed from the classroom community, and activities in the pullout program are unrelated to classroom learning. I believe TAG programs and teachers can serve more children and serve them better if a larger percentage of children work with the TAG teacher on a rotating, space available basis; work on student-identified problem-focused projects; and ultimately share the results in some form with their classroom community.

Laws about Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs) and special funding limitations do affect what we do with special programs, TAG as well as Chapter 1 and others. But some schools are finding creative ways to fulfill requirements while better serving children's learning needs. (See reference to Stanley Elementary School, Tacoma, Washington, in the Resources section.)

Grouping for learning within a self-contained classroom. For optimal learning, grouping decisions must flow from what we know about language and learning and must be appropriate for the purpose, or the task, addressed. Working groups should benefit all members. Student choice is important because this affects each member's commitment. But in the role of mediator the teacher participates in these decisions some of the time. During workshops, group configurations are fluid and informal. At other times, the teacher's or students' purposes may require longer term or more formalized arrangements. Teacher-led or teacher-supported whole class events—from daily read-alouds to mini-lessons to debriefings following workshops, or at the end of the day or week—support shared learning and community building. But more often students work collaboratively on individual and small group projects where they can more readily learn from one another and solve problems together. Self-contained classrooms have tremendous advantages over departmentalized programs, partly because of the complex interrelationships between the class as community and the class as individuals with varied associations. However, a two-teacher team can work very effectively with 50 to 55 students, building community while offering children a wider range of choices.

First, let's consider an appropriate grouping sequence for a **one-hour writing workshop.** Fluid, informal associations characterize a workshop, but whole class meetings are important factors, too.

- Whole class: 10 to 15 minutes. During this initial meeting you might conduct a mini-lesson on a strategy for finding writing topics, or read a book or passage from a book as an example of a stylistic device. (Literally hundreds of books available now in the "E" section of the library—for "Everybody," I say—demonstrate rich and varied language, and a full array of stylistic devices, genres, formats, and illustrations.) End the lesson with a statement encouraging children to try the strategy or device when it seems appropriate. Another day, a student might sit in the author's chair to share a piece of completed writing, or ask for help with a story in process. The student, whether in kindergarten or sixth grade, takes charge, calling on others to ask questions or respond. The teacher mediates this process only as much as is needed to support the child, but does not take over. Even kindergarten children can become successful at this process very quickly. After hearing a story in process, always ask what the author plans to do next. End this session with a question or statement to help all students consciously decide what they will do next.

- Individual, paired, and small group work: 35 to 40 minutes. You will generally find it helpful to begin by circulating, engaging in BRIEF (10- to 30-second) mini-conferences with individuals and small groups to see what and how they are doing, to answer questions, and to help them focus on goals. Children working on individual pieces of writing often engage in quiet conversation with nearby peers. They move in and out of conversations and collaborations with others. You can use this time to meet with small groups and individuals for writing conferences focused on content or organization, or mechanics for pieces about to be "published." Usually, students decide when they are ready to conference with you, in contrast to groups *you* form for a particular instructional purpose.

- Whole class: 5 to 10 minutes. This is a time for sharing, debriefing and closure. The student who asked for help from the author's chair tells the group what progress s/he has made.

Others have a chance to share an accomplishment, a problem they solved, or a question they'd like to bring to the group tomorrow.

Next, let's look at further examples that lead to fluid, **informal group work.** Informal classroom drama, readers' theatre, storytelling, or poetry workshops offer abundant opportunities for every imaginable grouping pattern. For instance:

- Whole class activities might include warm-up exercises for poetry writing or creative drama, reading a story aloud to serve as motivation for dramatic interpretation or an improvisation based on the story, telling a story to demonstrate storytelling techniques, sharing a prepared dramatic reading (readers' theatre), watching a play or skit prepared and presented by some of the students, or listening and responding to a class member's poem. These whole class meetings serve the same functions as those used in writers' workshop: to help students discover the many individual and group pursuits possible and to provide a forum for sharing with the learning community.

- Given an encouraging and flexible environment, students will group themselves in many different ways as they engage in these kinds of activities. When you first introduce these processes you may sometimes formalize groups by asking children to work in pairs, or dyads, or small groups for a particular purpose (skit, dramatic reading, poetry collaboration, storytelling practice groups). When you do, I recommend you leave children with as much choice about partners or team members as possible. However, though total student choice is a reasonable goal for a functioning learning community, it is rarely realistic until group members have learned to show respect and care for one another. So you may need to place some children together based on your knowledge of one or more individual personalities and needs, and the current dynamics of the group. Try to do this in a way that leaves children with some choices, some feeling of being in

Students will group themselves in many different ways.

control. More often, once your students have had some experience (whether by your introduction or because one or more students introduced the idea), these activities are likely to be initiated by students in informally self-selected, fluid associations.

Finally, let's focus on **"formalized" groups,** those that you, the teacher, determine for specific purposes. Formalized groups serve three kinds of purposes: grouping for guided experiences in activities such as drama and storytelling; grouping to teach group communication processes and strategies; and grouping for specific instructional purposes.

- Grouping for guided experiences: Already mentioned in the previous section, guided groups are short-term and intricately interwoven with whole class instruction or experiences. This individual or small group work is generally shared and responded to in some fashion by the whole class as part of a single session or meeting. It is part of an approach that supports students' learning by having them engage in guided experiences, monitored by you, the teacher, and used by themselves and other class members as they bring new processes under control.

- Grouping to teach group communication processes and strategies: In a classroom based on democratic values, it is essential for children (and adults!) to have group process strategies that give voice to each member of the class, that genuinely honor conflicting views and wishes, and that recognize consensus is rarely possible and—when decisions have to be made—people don't all have it "their way." A tension between the individual and the group is always there.

  I like to teach students small group process skills for two reasons: to improve their small group efforts, and to give individuals an equal voice in addressing issues we bring before the class as a whole. For small group discussion instruction, I use groups of five (four will do if necessary) and have them select roles for each member (e.g., leader, gate-keeper/time-keeper, scribe, reporter, group process observer). I let students know that group members don't always need separate roles for a group to function, and that not all roles are needed for all purposes, but learning what roles are possible and how these roles facilitate group discussion makes small group work run more smoothly when a particular process need arises.

Even though the instructional focus is on group *processes*, it's important that students address an "authentic" topic, one that is relevant, important, and interesting. If small group discussion is used as a step toward whole class sharing, we move from small groups to one of several whole-group formats. For example, at the end of a specified period of time, reporters may form a panel. Reporters, using notes from the scribes, summarize discussions or share noteworthy ideas. If we are dealing with a controversial topic or a difficult problem the group must solve, a Fish Bowl may follow. In this case, chairs are arranged in two concentric circles. Reporters sit in an inner circle, which also has an extra chair. The rest of the class sit in the outer circle. Reporters begin by each giving a brief summary of views from the small group discussions. When the summaries are finished, inner circle members begin discussing what they've shared. Talk is only allowed in the inner circle, but at any time a student may move into the inner circle, occupy the extra chair, and make a comment or ask a question. This input is incorporated into the discussion, and the extra chair is vacated to allow another outer circle participant to speak. When the issue is "hot," this process is lively, incredibly engaging, and wonderfully supportive of multiple voices and views.

It is essential to have group process strategies that give voice to each member.

An alternative to the Fish Bowl, which I learned from Oregon Law Related Education, is a process called Take a Stand, especially useful for issues that tend to polarize. Designate one wall as a continuum, with polar opposites at each end. Students who wish to speak place themselves along the continuum according to how they feel about the issue. Each has a chance to explain the reasons for the position s/he occupies. After the initial explanations, anyone in the room is allowed to ask questions or make comments. At any time those taking a stand may move, and may explain why they are moving. Again, voices are heard and the complexities of difficult issues are respected and valued.

Or a class may engage in a Grand Conversation. Seat the class in a circle. Go around the circle, giving each student a chance to comment on the topic or issue of discussion. A person may pass on the first round, but has a second chance to comment after the first round is completed. After everyone has a say, the discussion begins with questions and responses based on this input from the entire group. Using all of these configurations throughout the year addresses individual differences as each student finds approaches that "work" best.

- Grouping for specific instructional purposes: Finally, teacher-designated flexible groupings for specific purposes do have a place in a holistic/social-constructivist classroom. Two problems with traditional ability grouping are their static nature and the tendency for *all* instruction to occur within these permanent, supposedly homogeneous groups. Of course, these groups aren't really homogeneous—except, perhaps, with respect to a narrow range of skills—though the wide range of individual strengths and needs often goes unnoticed once students are labeled and placed together permanently. In addition to these problems, current knowledge makes it pretty clear that permanent ability grouping is damaging to students labeled as low performers, at the very least. I would argue it is damaging to all children, teaching values unacceptable in a democratic society.

  However, in a classroom where students work together in many different ways for many different purposes, it is entirely appropriate for you to group children together some of the time for specific, short-lived instructional purposes. This differs from traditional ability grouping because it is based on a current *performance* level focused on a specific process or topic. Quite often, you will call a group like this together only once or twice. For example, several students are using a lot of dialogue in their writing and you pull them together to show them how to use conventional punctuation. At other times a group may work together for several weeks, for example to read a novel, or pursue a theme. Membership in these literature circles or reader response groups will often depend upon a student's interests, not traditional ability-grouping measures. In primary grades, you may form reader response groups of four where each day two children conduct a bookshare prepared at

home the night before. Each group meeting place has one chair, for the reader. Long before children "actually read" all the words in a book they may tell about the story, or a favorite picture. Or a child may select only a part of the book to read. The listeners ask questions and respond to what they like and what the book makes them think of. In this arrangement, every child shares a book every other day, a pretty high level of active involvement!

In closing, we see that grouping patterns, in and of themselves, are not the issue. Our *reasons* (and the students' reasons) for particular associations, and what the players involved *actually do*, are key. For example, some cooperative learning activities, in which students in small groups rather than as individuals come up with the "right" answers to the teacher's questions, remain firmly rooted in a transmission model of learning, promoting the teacher's agenda and convergent thinking among students. Holistic/social-constructivist theory helps us to answer the sorts of questions that opened this paper, and to examine all the organizational issues that arise, in ways that lead to classrooms where rich learning occurs for everyone.

Resources for Further Study

Books and Articles

Besides the references at the end of this paper, I recommend the following resources:

Cooper, P. J., & Collins, R. (1992). *Look what happened to frog: Storytelling in education.* Scottsdale, AZ: Gorsuch Scarisbrick, Publishers.

A book filled with strategies and activities for storytelling.

Grossman, F. (1991). *Listening to the bells: Learning to read poetry by writing poetry.* Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, Heinemann.

An excellent resource for poetry workshops.

Harste, J. C., Short, K. G., & Burke, C. (1988). *Creating classrooms for authors: The reading-writing connection.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

The last half of this book is devoted to thorough descriptions of activities and structures for literacy learning.

Kobrin, B. (1988). *Eyeopeners! How to choose and use children's books about real people, places, and things.* New York: The Trumpet Club.

A superb resource for nonfiction, excellent support for a classroom where children are pursuing a wide range of topics.

Paley, V. G. (1981). *Wally's stories: Conversations in the kindergarten.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

You won't find a better demonstration of teacher questioning that leads students to do most of the talking—and with one another—than this book of conversations with Vivian Paley and her kindergartners.

The Reading Teacher, 44 (8). April 1991.

This special issue, focused on organizing for instruction, has several articles that include instructional activities.

Renzulli, J. S., & Smith, L. H. (1980). Revolving door: A truer turn for the gifted. *Learning, 9* (3), 91–93.

Renzulli suggests an inclusive model for TAG education.

Stewig, J. W. (1983). *Informal drama in the elementary language arts program.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Still one of the best resources for getting started with creative drama in the classroom.

Tompkins, G. E. (1990). *Teaching writing: Balancing process and product.* Columbus: Merrill Publishing Co.

This book has everything a "cook book" promises but is definitely NOT a cook book. Solidly and clearly grounded in current research and theory, this book has a wealth of ideas and materials to support your developing writing program.

People and Places

1. Vicki Swartz, Curriculum and Staff Development, Boise/Eliot School, Portland Public Schools. School phone: 280-6171. Vicki has extensive experience teaching from a holistic/social-constructivist perspective. She has most recently taught in Northeast Portland where she remained with her classes through several grade levels. She often teaches classes on multi-age grouping and other grouping and organizational patterns.

2. Dan Kryszak, Chapter 1 Team Leader, Stanley Elementary School, 1712 S. 17th, Tacoma, WA 98405. (206) 596-1376. Stanley Elementary School has no pullout programs. Instead, the entire special education team goes into classrooms to provide services. Call Dan Kryszak for information or to set up a visit to see this program in action.

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